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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000280

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DEPT FOR NEA/I - JDAVIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: FM ZEBARAI ON NEIGHBORS PROCESS; SFA FRAMEWORK;
IRAN VISIT; REFUGEE MONEY FOR JORDAN

REF: A. REF. (A) 07 STATE 149971

[1](#)B. REF. (B) 07 BAGHDAD 4085

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for Reasons 1.4(d/b)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. In a January 29 meeting, Foreign Minister Zebari told PolCounselor he expected a complete round of Neighbors Working Group meetings to take place in February and a Baghdad PrepCon (level to be determined) to be held in March. He said another top MFA priority was to appoint career diplomats to fill ambassadorial positions in Riyadh, Damascus and Cairo. Zebari reported that the ministry's team was ready for Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) negotiations but was worried that negotiations could become as difficult as those for the SPD and the UNSCR renewal. He agreed that the timing of Iranian President Ahmedinejad's proposed March visit was undesirable and said he would speak to President Talabani about alternatives. Zebari said he would return to the Cabinet in an effort to gain approval to release the GOI's \$8 million pledge to UNHCR in Jordan. END SUMMARY.

Neighbors

[1](#)2. (C) Zebari confirmed that the MFA was working with UNAMI to establish a support mechanism and said his goal was to hold a full round of working group meetings in February and a "senior level" PrepCon in Baghdad in March. He mentioned that the MFA had already contacted participating countries, but not all had responded. Zebari admitted he had toyed with the idea of a "Neighbor's only" Foreign Ministers PrepCon in Baghdad, but conceded that security concerns probably foreclosed the issue. He noted Deputy Foreign Minister Labeeb Abbawi was handling Neighbors matters and assured us they were a top priority.

Strategic Framework Agreement

[1](#)3. (C) Without providing names, Zebari said MFA's SFA team was complete (NOTE: Post understands Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Hamoud will lead the team, although we have also heard unconfirmed reports that Director for Multilateral Affairs Ambassador Srood Najib may also be involved. Post will continue to inquire and advise septel. END NOTE.) Zebari indicated he was already in touch with National Security Advisor Mowaffuq Rubaie, but worried that the SFA negotiations could prove as difficult as those for the SPD and the UNSCR renewal. PolCounselor cautioned that the USG would not accept a repeat performance of the previous negotiations and underscored that the entire GOI was aware of this. He noted increased US domestic interest in the SFA process and said that the guiding idea behind the agreement was to provide a framework for normal bilateral relations between Iraq and the U.S. He described some recent articles

in the U.S. media as "unhelpful," and assured Zebari they did not reflect administration thinking.

Iranian President Ahmedinejad's Visit to Baghdad

¶4. (C) Zebari confided that the GOI had "killed an Ahmedinejad visit 2 or 3 times previously" and that he pleaded with President Talabani not to give the Iranians a date. PolCounselor said the proposed March 21 date (per media accounts) came at a bad time for Iraq and for the U.S. Zebari agreed the timing was inappropriate and said he would speak to President Talabani about alternatives.

Iraqi Consulates in Detroit and Los Angeles

¶5. (C) Zebari was delighted to hear the Department had agreed to the GOI request to open consulates in Detroit and Los Angeles (ref A). He informed us that the Governments of Germany, Canada and Syria had agreed to Iraqi consulates in Frankfurt, Montreal and Aleppo, respectively. Zebari did not mention what, if any, reciprocal consideration the GOI would provide. Previously Zebari indicated the SARG might be interested in establishing a consulate in Mosul, an issue he discussed with SARG interlocutors during his December trip to Damascus (ref B).

Ambassadors

¶6. (C) Zebari volunteered that Ambassadorial appointments had been the main issue of that day's Cabinet meeting. He deplored the sectarian credentials of many of the candidates

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and dismissed them as professionally unsuited for their proposed positions. Compounding the problem, he said, no women, Christians or Turkmen were among those being considered. Zebari remarked that Iraq now had 75 diplomatic missions and one of his principle goals was to push ministry careerist, not political appointees, into the growing number of slots abroad. Zebari said Ambassadorial nominations for missions in Riyadh, Kuwait and Cairo were his top priority. (NOTE: The MFA can nominate, without Cabinet approval, Ambassador-rank candidates to fill Chief-of-Mission slots; nominees still require CoR approval. END NOTE.) He added that the previous week, after a year of stalling, the Cabinet had approved a new Iraqi Foreign Service bill that Zebari said would provide the "legal framework" for Iraq to meet its growing diplomatic commitments.

Refugee Pledge

¶7. (C) PolCounselor expressed dismay that transfer of Iraq's USD 8 million refugee pledge to Jordan was gridlocked and said the GOI had to come up with a solution. Zebari, who described the entire episode as a "big personal embarrassment," said he would have to secure Iraqi Cabinet approval to do this and did not appear optimistic at the prospect. PolCounselor said it was particularly important to close this issue before UNHCR High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres' upcoming visit to the region.

Kitchen Cabinet, Central Bank Fire, Arab-League-Sponsored Reconciliation Conference

¶8. (C) Zebari continued that the Central Bank of Iraq fire had been the previous day's "Kitchen Cabinet" (PM, DPM, MFA, MOD, Planning Finance, Electricity, Oil and Interior) main topic. The debacle, which Zebari noted was the latest in a series of suspicious fires, "undermined people's confidence in the GOI" and was due to the "negligence of ministers." He recommended urgent action to shore up public confidence and

regretted Ahmed Chalabi's rapid arrival on the scene, noting it fueled rumors already swirling around the fire. Zebari also mentioned he expected a delegation under Arab League (AL) Deputy Secretary General Ahmed Ben Hilli to visit Baghdad in the coming week to discuss an Iraqi reconciliation conference to be held under AL auspices.

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